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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000367

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DEPT PASS TO EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE  
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: WHITHER MARCH 14 AFTER MARCH 14?

REF: BEIRUT 358

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison  
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

#### SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Druze leader Walid Jumblatt conveyed the image of a stagnated March 14 bloc to the Charge in a March 8 meeting at his Clemenceau residence. With majority leader Saad Hariri in Saudi Arabia, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea in the U.S., and regional support unreliable, Jumblatt lamented that it would be some time until the March 14 leaders could gather again to synchronize their positions on various issues. Jumblatt does not believe Lebanon should send a delegation to the March 29-30 Arab League summit in Damascus.

¶2. (C) For March 18, when Parliament is supposed to start its normal legislative session, Jumblatt is considering a public display of March 14 unity through a strong showing of attendance and a declaration, if Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri refuses to open parliament. Jumblatt expressed doubt that the 2009 parliamentary elections would take place. Jumblatt thought the Patriarch could prove pivotal in pushing for cabinet reshuffling and the U.S. could assist through reducing the presence of Arab leaders at the summit and through securing Arab contributions to the Special Tribunal. End summary.

¶3. (C) The Charge, accompanied by PolOff, visited Druze leader Walid Jumblatt at his home in Clemenceau on March 8. MP Fuad Saad and MP and Minister of Information Ghazi Aridi, both from Jumblatt's bloc, were also present.

WAITING FOR SAAD HARIRI

¶4. (C) Acknowledging a difference in opinions among March 14 leaders on various issues, Jumblatt said here was disagreement among the Christians on electoral reform. In particular, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea is pushing for small qadas (districts), whereas Jumblatt equated small districts to partition, where Christians vote for Christians, and Muslims vote for Muslims, a proposal Jumblatt rejects. He said the March 14 leaders need to wait until majority leader Saad Hariri returns from Saudi Arabia and Geagea returns from the U.S. before they can attempt to reach consensus on this.

GLOOMY OUTLOOK ON THINGS TO COME

15. (C) Jumblatt wondered aloud if there would still be no president elected at this time next year, suggesting also that parliamentary elections scheduled for March 2009 might not occur. He explained, "Our enemies are waiting for the next U.S. president," and that once a U.S. president was elected, it would take time for the new administration to form its policy on the Middle East. He mentioned that a Lebanese lobby in the U.S. would need to start working with the new administration. Iran and Syria oppose our parliamentary elections, he continued, and the U.S. has not been able to deliver on the Roadmap for the Israelis and Palestinians, implying that therefore the U.S. could not deliver on a Lebanese president.

#### BOYCOTT THE ARAB LEAGUE SUMMIT

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16. (C) Jumblatt said Lebanon should not attend the March 29-30 Arab League summit in Damascus, regardless of who is invited. For Syria, he explained, it is a win-win situation and Lebanese attendance sends the message that Syria can prevent the presidency yet still receive a Lebanese delegation. Jumblatt glumly added that Saudi Arabia is the only country that is supporting Lebanon on the summit, suspecting that while Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak is stating publicly he will not attend, someone from Egypt is likely to go. "Kuwait and the UAE are not with us; Tunisia never goes anywhere...Oman will not participate at a high level, and Libya and Qatar will send a delegation," Jumblatt recounted. He said the U.S. could help by working to reduce the presence of Arab leaders at the summit.

#### SEEKING REGIONAL SUPPORT

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17. (C) Jumblatt expressed his concern that Egypt is not in a good position to help Lebanon, saying that it has taken Egypt two years to understand the Iranian threat, adding that Mubarak is getting old, and the next strong candidate to take power is the Muslim Brotherhood, which is connected to Hamas. He lamented that the Kuwaitis did not handle the backlash to the Imad Mugniyeh assassination very well, saying that the Kuwaiti government is afraid. As for the UAE, Prime Minister Mohammed bin Rashid is problematic because of the UAE's commercial relationship with Iran.

18. (C) The Special Tribunal is a major way our Arab allies can help us, opined Jumblatt. He inquired about whether the Saudi contribution had been received in Lebanon yet, and stated that the UAE has not contributed. He suggested the U.S. encourage Saudi contribution to Lebanon's reserves, and UAE contribution to the Tribunal.

#### WHAT TO DO?

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19. (C) According to Jumblatt, the worst case scenario in breaking the political impasse would be to turn to the Patriarch to approve major decisions, such as cabinet reshuffling. Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, Saad Hariri and the Christian MPs should go see him, Jumblatt advised. If March 14 were to push for cabinet reshuffling, Jumblatt reviewed the possibilities for Shia ministers. He mentioned Ibrahim Shamseddine, an anti-Hizballah Shia whose name has been circulating as a potential replacement. He also named Ahmad Assad, as the most outspoken against Hizballah (retel).

110. (C) One of the MPs mentioned that parliament was scheduled to resume its regular sessions on March 18, adding that Berri was not ready to open parliament. The MP proposed that the March 14 MPs do a publicity campaign, for example, standing outside the locked room and making a declaration, demonstrating March 14's readiness to the public. Jumblatt talked about sending a big March 14 delegation to Washington,

DC to seek support.

¶11. (C) Jumblatt commented on the anticipated November 2009 end of the term of Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Michel Sleiman, saying that the Council of Ministers, if there is no president, could renew his mandate after a five-day waiting period. The second in command is currently a Druze, but Jumblatt said it was preferable for a Maronite such as Sleiman in charge, especially if there is no Maronite president.

¶12. (C) After weeks of laying low in his Clemenceau residence due to security threats, Jumblatt is planning to visit his Mukhtara hometown in the Shouf mountains in the next week, to commemorate the 31st year since his father Kamal was assassinated, in what many here call Syria's first assassination of key Lebanese leaders.

COMMENT  
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¶13. (C) There seems to be a sense of complacency by March 14, at a time which can be capitalized because of the momentum gained by the February 14 memorial for former PM Rafiq Hariri's assassination, as well as upcoming important historical dates, including March 14, the date of the movement's inception, and April 26, commemorating the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon. Jumblatt attributed March 14's current state of treading water to the absences of Saad and Geagea, although we question how different it would be if the two March 14 leaders were in town. It is possible Jumblatt feels March 14 and the opposition have reached a deadlock and is unsure how to move out of it, and therefore is biding his time until something forces a change. On a positive note, Jumblatt ally and Telecommunications Minister Marwan Hamadeh telephoned Charge March 11 to report that he and March 14 colleagues had spoken further regarding a Parliament-related public event on March 18 to mark the non-resumption of Parliament's regular session. End comment.

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